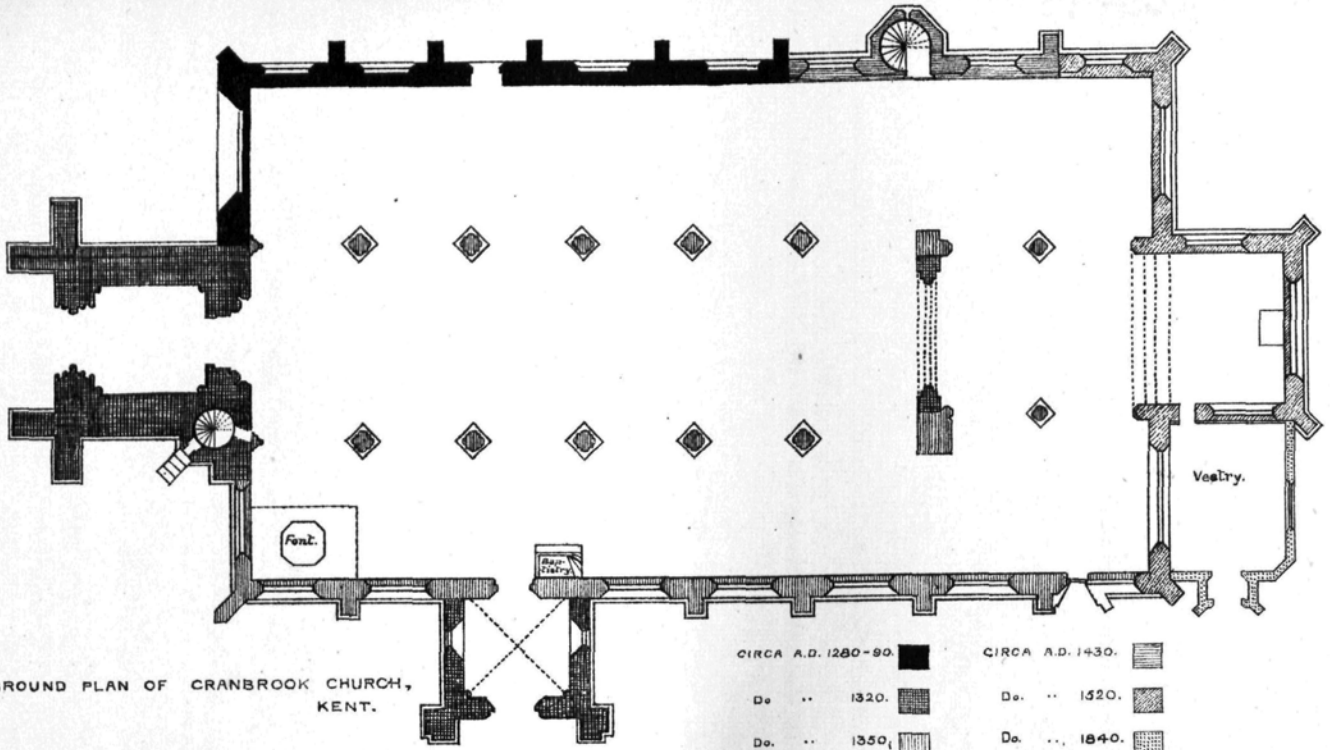


GROUND PLAN OF CRANBROOK CHURCH, KENT.

Scale of 0 10 20 40 60 80 100 Feet.

D.F. KELL, PHOTO-LITHO. 6, FURNIVAL ST HOLBORN, E.C.

CRANBROOK CHURCH.*

BY REV. J. CAVE-BROWNE, M.A.

THE first thought that rises in the mind of an archæologist, when he attempts to write the history of a parish church, is, "What says Domesday?" Now as to Cranbrook, Domesday says *nothing*. The name does not occur. Its absence may be accounted for on two grounds. First, that unrivalled Record—the oldest of National Records in Europe—was not designed as a gazetteer, but as an authoritative Survey of lands held under the Crown, to shew for military and fiscal purposes who was in each case the responsible tenant or owner, and what was his military service, and the amount of rating and taxes his holding involved. Thus the existence of a manor, or of a church attached to a manor, would not necessarily be mentioned unless the manor or the advowson belonged to the Crown. The absence therefore of the name is no evidence either way of the existence of a church here. And, secondly, the state of the district would imply the improbability of a church being here at the time of the Conquest, when Domesday was written. Camden describes Cranbrook as "lying in the great wood." It lay in the heart of the "Anderedsweald," or, as Isaac Taylor calls it, the "Great Forest Andredesleagh," now known as the "Weald," which stretched for about 120 miles, with a breadth of some 30 miles, through the central tracts of Kent and Sussex. This range of country, now famous for its fertility, was in the eleventh and twelfth centuries a vast forest, without township or even village, partitioned into

* The writer desires to acknowledge his obligation to the Rev. T. A. Carr, formerly Vicar of the parish, and to the late Mr. W. Tarbutt of Cranbrook—whose indefatigable researches into the history of his native town appears in three pamphlets, on the Church, the Clergy, and the Monuments—for much of the information contained in the following pages.

denes or wooded valleys for swine pasture, or, as Harris describes it, "A desart and a waste, neither planted nor peopled, but filled only with herds of deer and droves of swine."* In such a district it were vain to look for a Church.

Not until the reign of King John was this wild district brought under what was called "Hundred Law," that is, so partitioned off into hundreds as to be brought within any jurisdiction. It was then divided into "the Seven Hundreds," and of these Cranbrook was the largest and most important. It first appears in this character in *Testa de Nevill*, the Survey instituted by Henry III. and Edward I. about 1270—1280, as Crennbroc, a part of the fee of Margaret de Redeware. It had now assumed a recognized place in county administration, and had a more settled population than that which previously existed of scattered roving parties of swine-herds; and the next step was the obtaining a market of its own. The grant for this was made by Edward I. in 1289 through Archbishop Peckham. Its position at the crossing-point of many of the roads from every quarter, which, though probably little better than bridle-paths, supplied the only means of intercourse with other parts of the county, rendered this a necessity.

The next mention we meet with of Cranbrook is in the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of Pope Boniface in 1291, and then it is said to have a church. Twenty years later, in 1310, it had lost its probably first Rector, for in that year Archbishop Reynolds† collates William de Mepham to the then vacant rectory.

Hasted says‡ that Edward III., in the sixth year of his reign (A.D. 1332), appropriated the Rectory of Cranbrook to the See of Canterbury; and Tarbutt§ adopts the same view, adducing it as evidence of the King's zeal for the

* Harris's *History of Kent*, p. 347.

† The entry runs thus: "1310. Robertus Archiepiscopus," etc., etc. "Magistro Willielmo de Mepham, presbytero," etc., etc. "Ecclesiam Parochialem de Cranebroke nostre Diocesis vacantem, et ad nostram collationem pleno jure spectantem . . . . tibi conferimus intuitu caritatis et Rectorem instituimus," etc., etc.

‡ Vol. vii., p. 3.

§ *Annals of Cranbrook Church*, p. 6.

Church; both no doubt following Bishop Tanner.* But the entry in Archbishop Reynolds's Register at Lambeth† distinctly shews that this appointment of William de Mepham was a "Collatio," meaning that the patronage was already in the hands of the Archbishop.

Cranbrook must also have had its Vicars at this early date; for in the "Sede Vacante" Records at Canterbury it is said that in the year 1333 the *custodia* of the church was committed to the Vicar.‡ This would probably have occurred on the death of William de Mepham, and during the interval between the primacies of Simon de Meopham and John de Stratford, when the spiritualities of the See would be in the hands of the Prior and Convent. In the same records mention is made of Vicars of Cranbrook in the years 1364 and 1371.

It was in the reign of Edward III. that this little town received its great stimulus. The year 1332 forms an epoch in its history. Edward, having observed during his visit to Flanders the effect of the Flemish loom industry on the prosperity of the people, resolved to import into England some of those skilled craftsmen, and selected Cranbrook as one of the centres for weaving broadcloth, for which it soon became so famous. Why this still retired spot should have been selected is an enquiry of some interest. Perhaps its very retirement, which its very name, the haunt of Cranes, implies, constituted one of the attractions.

Others no doubt were found in its ample supply of wood, and of water too; for *fuel* and *water* would be essential to the manufacture; and the Weald, with its milder climate, would perhaps be more congenial to the Flemish than the more Northern Forests of Sherwood or Arden; while its lordly oaks would furnish an ample supply of timber, and here, almost only through the length and breadth of the Weald, would be found the also equally needed *water*. It seems worth noting that while there are *denes* or *dens*§ well-nigh innumerable in that district, no less than seven of the

* *Notitia Monastica*, p. 199.
† Reynolds's Reg., f. 49 b. ‡ Vol. Q, f. 180.
§ Furley's *Weald of Kent*, vol. ii., pp. 728, 827.

towns having that suffix to their names, this alone, with the exception of Tonbridge and Edenbridge, proclaims the presence of water sufficient to entitle it to the designation of a "brook," or requiring a "bridge," the present narrow stream running below the town representing what was then no doubt a brook of goodly proportions. May not this account for the selection by Edward III. of this spot for his imported broadcloth workers?

This brings us back to the Church itself. Its dedication to St. Dunstan is not without interest. In the not remote parish of Mayfield, included also within the Weald, are still preserved reputed relics of that distinguished but much maligned Primate, who was wont to find there a favourite place for retirement and retreat, and whose legendary life had no doubt made him an object of awe and veneration in the neighbourhood.

Assuming then, as I think we must, that three successive churches have stood on this site, and more or less on the same lines, it is clear that the earliest could not have been built before the later years of the thirteenth century, and that would have been of the simple form. No bold massive Norman, or Romanesque, which belongs to the preceding centuries, and arrests the eye and calls out the admiration of the antiquary in almost every Church along the eastern fringe of the county, nor any of that lighter and more ornate style which characterizes the following one, would be found or looked for in it. Rough rubble walls pierced by narrow lancet windows would probably have been the best that this retired, little known, and but recently redeemed Weald could boast.

The question then arises, "Does any part of that earliest church remain in the present building?" The answer must, I think, be in the affirmative. In the west end of the north aisle, in the corner abutting from the tower, the extreme and irregular thickness of the wall suggests that it must have formed the eastern wall of the basement of a tower; and this is confirmed by the discovery made by the Rev. T. A. Carr of the foundations of such a tower extending westward from this north aisle, where the lines could be

distinctly traced. Then again, along the north wall of this aisle, the rough rubble work externally of the first four bays, without plinth, and the corresponding string-course along the wall inside, carry us back to the thirteenth century, and seem to have belonged to the first small Early English church.

As the village grew into a small town, boasting too its market, the enlargement of the Church became necessary. This enlargement was enough to constitute it a second Church, for what was left of the earlier one was converted into a north aisle, retaining its old level; while at a lower level, to adapt itself to the sloping ground, a new nave and aisle were added on at the south. In the porch we detect the improved masonry of the early years of the fourteenth century, and, very soon after, the lower stages at least of the present Tower. The Church was now carried eastward as far as the present Chancel arch (where at the restoration in 1868 the basement and the marble slab that had formed the top of the high altar were discovered). About eighty years later (1430) it seems as if the north aisle was extended by the addition of a chapel dedicated to the Virgin, marked off by a roodloft, trace of which remains in the small door now built up, still visible in the wall, to which access was gained by the newel stair running up in the projecting buttress. Another little trace of the handiwork of the fourteenth century may be seen in a very delicately moulded recessed niche in the north wall, which may have been used for an image or a light. And in the same wall, nearer the north doorway, is a wider recess under a debased arch, which once could boast of fresco work, now so utterly disfigured as to be undecipherable.

Such, it may be assumed, were the leading features of the second Church; such it would have stood through the fourteenth and into the fifteenth century. By that time, however, the Flemish clothworkers had become a prosperous and influential body. In their native land they had doubtless been accustomed to grander and more ornate churches, and were not content with the chaste simplicity of the Early English style. Moreover the addition of so many to the population of the town would have necessitated an expansion

of the church; for the "Grey Coats" of Kent had now become very numerous and wealthy. To attain to this end they seem to have swept away all the ruder work they found, retaining only the south porch and the tower, and then to have lengthened the nave by adding on a chancel, carrying the high altar farther eastward; and with it apparently the chancel arch itself, for its curves and mouldings belong rather to the fourteenth than the fifteenth century. And may not the same remark apply to the two side windows of the chancel, that they too belonged to the earlier church, and were moved here when the chancel was lengthened?

The church then had a high-pitched roof at a lower level than the present one; for before the recent alterations were made there were traces on the east wall of the tower and corresponding ones on the chancel arch, shewing that the roof originally lay on the line of the present string-course, which runs along over the arcade on the south of the nave. (But these have since disappeared.) The present clerestory was evidently a subsequent addition, in the Perpendicular style of the early years of the sixteenth century, and probably contemporary with the Perpendicular windows of the north and south aisles. It was at this time doubtless that the nave itself was widened some 4 feet, and the south aisle carried out the same distance at the expense of the groining of the roof of the porch.* The parish records shew that about the years 1520—1522 liberal benefactions and subscriptions were made for the enlargement of the church. Among others Mr. Walter Roberts left in his will the following legacy: "Towards the makynge of the Middel Ile of the Church oon (one) half of all the tymbers that shall be (required) for the makynge of the Rooffe of the said worke."†

In early Wills mention is made of several altars and chapels besides the high altar; one dedicated to St. Mary, probably at the east end of the north aisle; another to

* A noteworthy evidence of this widening is also to be detected in the fact that a plain semicircular arch in the west wall of the nave, leading to a turret stair of the tower, was now closed up and half hidden by the pier of the first bay of the colonnade which separates the nave from the south aisle.

† Somerset House, Maynwarynge, f. 22, dated 1522.

St. Giles* (St. Egidius), eastward in extension of that of St. Mary, the pious work of John Roberts of Glassenbury in 1460, which his son Walter embellished by inserting in the east window a kneeling figure of his father in armour with his helmet by his side, and some shields containing family escutcheons. The shields and the upper portion of the good knight's figure have been preserved, but were removed from the east window and placed in one in the north wall.

During the next century a change had passed over the religious mind of the nation, and Thomas, the son of Walter Roberts (the first Baronet), in abhorrence of all trace or association of Popery, which he connected with the chapel his grandfather had endowed and his father embellished, transferred his affection from the north to the south aisle, into which he collected the family tombs, and caused it to be thenceforth known as the "Roberts' Chapel."†

There were altars also to St. Thomas, St. Katherine, and St. Clement, mentioned in various Wills, which cannot now have their several places assigned to them.

In the south wall of the chancel is a door now opening to the vestry, which before vestry-rooms came into vogue was known as the "Priest's door." On these the architects of those days were often wont to bestow special care, and display special taste, as was evidently the case here. For, when the comparatively modern vestry was introduced into this angle of the Church, the original doorway was removed and placed where it now stands, inserted under the lower part of the easternmost window in the south wall, the full proportions of which it somewhat mutilates, though in itself a very beautiful specimen of the elaborate stonework of the fifteenth century, no doubt the pious offering of Thomas Hendley, then living at Corsehorne, as the initials "T. H." indicate.

One feature of traditional, if not historical, interest demands notice. In the upper part of the south porch is a small room, now closed off from the Church itself, but evi-

* "Corpusque meum sepeliendum ad aram S'ti Egiddi." Extract from the Will of John Roberds [*sic*]. Prerog. Court of Canterbury, Stockton 22.

† This at least is the solution of the transfer given by Tarbutt in his *Cranbrook Church and its Monuments*, p. 33.

dently at one time opening out into it by a wide spanned arch, the traces of which are still visible in the wall. This was doubtless the *parvise*, a room of many uses in connection with the church; a living room for a chantry priest, or a library, or a school-room, or a Record-room. It was sometimes called the "Church-house." After the Reformation its use was much more secular, and answered the purpose of a vestry-room for the clergy, or even for parish meetings.* But the room we are describing, now only a lumber-room, has obtained traditionally a distinction in connection with the Marian persecutions, which gives it a notoriety. On the authority of old John Foxe, it was used as a temporary prison, the occasion being this: a poor Cranbrook man, named John Bland, was tried at the Sessions here for heresy, and convicted of holding "new doctrines." There was no jail near, or even a police cell, so Sir John Baker, the then owner of Sissinghurst, who presided at the trial, had him thrust, that night at least, into this room for security; hence it obtained the name of "Baker's Hole," or "Baker's Jail;" while he himself, in consequence of the severity of his judgments on those who favoured the Reformation, was thenceforth known as "Bloody Baker."

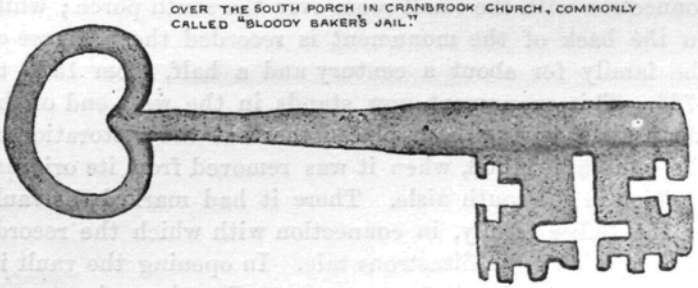
Now the very aspect of this place, its double doors, the outer one very massive, and the thick staples on which it turned, the heavy lock in its unwieldy frame of wood stretching nearly across the door, undoubtedly suggest a place of security for some highly valued treasure, whether church vessels or MSS., and also have certainly a very prison-like character. Nor is the key of this outer door unworthy of special notice, not only for its size, but still more for its complex construction (of which a sketch is given opposite). It is no mere dummy, but the elaborate wards within the lock itself correspond exactly with those of the key, and present a remarkably fine specimen of the beautiful iron-work which a fourteenth-century smithy could produce.

Before leaving this room and the steps leading up to it,

* This is supported by the fact that old Samuel Dence, who died in 1573, having founded the "writing school" in the place, willed that he should be buried at the foot of the *vestry* steps, and his tomb still stands at the bottom of the stone steps leading up to this room.

some notice should be taken of what is almost a unique feature of an English church. In its list of Vicars Cranbrook had in the beginning of the eighteenth century a man of singular power and profound learning, named John Johnson, appointed to this parish in 1707 by Archbishop Tenison. Finding that the Anabaptists formed a very considerable body in the place, and that their great objection to coming into communion with the Church of England was based on the custom of infant baptism and "sprinkling," he resolved to remove if possible this stumbling-block, and with that view built a *baptistery* sufficiently large for an adult to stand upright in and to be "immersed." There it stands at the door of the room, as evidence of his conciliatory spirit; but the Church Registers do not disclose any evidence of the depth or reality of their scruples on the score of immersion, as only one instance is there recorded; while there are frequent entries of adult baptisms, some even of persons as old as 40 years, as in the case of one William Couchman, born in 1653, and baptized in 1694.

THE 14TH CENTURY KEY OF THE OUTER DOOR LEADING INTO A ROOM OVER THE SOUTH PORCH IN CRANBROOK CHURCH, COMMONLY CALLED "BLOODY BAKER'S JAIL."



Mention must now be made of the monuments of the Church, of which there are two of colossal proportions, and of genealogical if not artistic value. The most ancient of the monuments is a large slab lying in the centre of the choir; its inscription, in Lombardic characters, telling that it was to the memory of one "Stephanus," for whom the Virgin was entreated to plead. Tarbutt thought he could identify him with an almoner of Battle Abbey, who was called "Stephanus de Cranebrook," and who died about the

year 1388. On the north wall of the chancel is a mural tablet of considerable local interest, commemorating in a long Latin inscription the distinguished career of Richard Fletcher, who was the first Vicar of Cranbrook after the Reformation. He died in 1585.

Other monuments of local interest abound on the floor and the walls; but the two most noteworthy are those connected with the Roberts* and Baker families. Of the former, one of gigantic proportions, if not artistic, is of great genealogical interest as giving the descent of twelve generations, from the Walter Roberts of Glassenbury—the victim of his loyal protection of his friend and neighbour Sir John Guildeforde in the reign of Richard III.—down to Jane, the daughter of another Walter Roberts, the sixth Baronet, who became the most unhappy of women as the wife of the profligate George, the third Duke of St. Albans.

There is a pyramidal monument of somewhat similar character on which appears inscribed the history of the Baker family of Sissinghurst, in this parish, especially the Sir John Baker whose name has been already mentioned in connection with the small room over the south porch; while on the back of the monument is recorded the pedigree of the family for about a century and a half, from 1578 to 1733. This monument now stands in the west end of the north aisle, having been placed there at the restoration of the church in 1868, when it was removed from its original position in the south aisle. There it had marked the vault of the Baker family, in connection with which the records of the parish tell a disastrous tale. In opening the vault in 1727, and enlarging it for one more coffin, the main support of the pier adjoining the chancel arch was weakened by the removal of some of the stones, and the pier collapsed and brought down with it some 50 feet of the roof on that side.

It only remains to speak of the stately Tower, with its rich peal of bells, and of the shields which appear on its

* The Roberts family had clearly no mean position in the county—Walter was Sheriff in 1464, Thomas in 1533, and another Thomas in 1622; while his son, Sir Thomas, a Baronet, was the Knight of the Shire for Kent in 1691, and again in 1695, and M.P. for Maidstone in 1702—and are still worthily represented at Glassenbury Manor.

west face. These are connected with the history of the parish, as bearing the arms of three families of mark who at one time owned important manor-houses here. The Berhams were the lords of Sissinghurst in the reign of Edward III., and appear emblazoned *three bears sable;* the Betenhams, of that ilk, represented by *a saltire engrailed between four bears' heads erased;* and the Wilsfords of Hartridge, *a chevron engrailed between three leopards' heads.* While a little higher than the line on which these are placed is a shield bearing the arms of Archbishop Chichele, impaling those of the See of Canterbury.

These appear to be the leading features and points of interest in this "Cathedral of the Weald," a church the possession of which may go far to reconcile Cranbrook to the loss of its cloth-weavers, since it stands as a lasting monument of a class of men who were the pious benefactors of their adopted home.